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ABSTRACT

The Operation Rescue project was designed to develop a classroom setting for the delivery of comprehensive educational services to "at risk" young adolescents. The classroom was established as part of the pre-existing Jonesboro Alternative School, and it utilized the basic academic and social program developed by this entity over 12 years of work with older dropouts and potential dropouts. Those accepted into the program were students who had been identified as "at risk" in their normal junior high and upper elementary school classrooms. The Operation Rescue population was composed of a majority of 14- and 15-year-olds who were referred for serious academic underachievement, serious behavioral problems, or both. Working with this population required particular skills; staff needed to be capable of structuring the classroom and of being in good control of both their feelings and of the students' behaviors so as not to escalate with individual students or with the group. The program that was developed is, in general, a duplication of a functional family. The staff characteristics, combined with some specific learning activities and a general classroom atmosphere, have created a program which can successfully address the educational and developmental needs of many children from highly dysfunctional families. (ABL)

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FINAL REPORT

Operation Rescue

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Operation Rescue Final Report

Introduction:

The Operation Rescue project was designed to develop a classroom setting for the delivery of comprehensive educational services to "at risk" young adolescents. These youth (ages nine to fifteen) were to receive services in four areas: academic, social, behavioral and vocational. The classroom was established as part of the pre-existing Jonesboro Alternative School, and it utilized the basic academic and social program developed by this entity over twelve years of work with older "drop outs and potential drop outs." This project was designed to take these previously developed principles and apply them to a younger population in a self-contained classroom, thereby offering encouragement to other school districts to become involved in an early (upper elementary/junior high) identification and intervention plan for at risk young people. As the project evolved over a three year period, information was obtained about the nature of this target population and about effective methods for working with them. In keeping with the over-riding philosophy of the Jonesboro Alternative School, flexibility was maintained and adjustments were made on a continuous basis in an attempt both to meet the individual needs of specific students and to enhance functioning of the group as

a whole. Therefore, this was an evolutionary process in which, perhaps, there was movement away from the original plan, but which eventually developed into a functional program for helping troubled younger students.

The purpose of this paper is to interpret the information that has been obtained, and to describe the program which has evolved. To facilitate understanding, some information about the evolution of the project will be included. It should be understood, however, that the method has been a highly experimental one of identifying needs or specific areas of weakness, attempting a variety of solutions, maintaining the efforts that yielded successful outcomes, and discarding those that did not. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to provide a detailed analysis of this process. The end result is a replicable program which seems to meet the needs of the target population effectively.

Population:

Students were accepted into the program who had been identified as "at risk" in their normal Jonesboro Public School junior high and upper elementary school classrooms. Since there was a second classroom at the Alternative School, funded by the Job Training Program Act (JTPA) for fourteen and fifteen year old economically disadvantaged youth, the Operation Rescue population was composed of a majority of fourteen and fifteen

year olds from "middle class" homes, combined with some younger students from both lower and middle socio-economic backgrounds. The reasons for referral were primarily serious academic underachievement, or serious behavioral/social adjustment problems in the school setting (acting out behaviors or truancy), or both.

As school personnel became involved with the individual students and their families, it became obvious that family dysfunction was a primary causative factor in these students' behaviors. Of the students served over the three year period, 48% were the children of at least one substance abusing parent; 30% of the others presented evidence of other types of severe family dysfunction (a history of placement in foster care, a disabled parent, death of a parent or sibling, sexual abuse...). In general, the students presented a pattern of very difficult behaviors--short attention spans, high level of distractability, hyper-exciteability, inappropriate responses to positive adult attention, willingness to elicit negative attention, negative responses to structure and authority figures, lots of emotional "game playing" with peers. There was a predominant feeling in the classroom, especially during the first year of operation, that it was impossible to give these children as a group enough staff attention.

Several changes were made during the first year to adapt to

these behavior problems. Since the Alternative School's educational approach involves individually programmed learning with one-on-one direct teaching of concepts as needed, the school's classrooms are generally very quiet settings. Students who behave and work well during the class period can earn "rec room time" with their friends between classes. Originally, it had been assumed that all twenty students could be taught in one classroom with a team teaching approach. A second classroom had been set aside as a recreation area. After it became obvious that many of these students could not function in a classroom with nineteen peers, the project was divided with ten students and one staff member in each classroom. Students then rotated between the two teachers over the course of their school day. Students who routinely escalated behaviorally with one another were separated during classtime; there were somewhat fewer distractions; students' desks could be turned away from one another; there was more space around each individual. A second original goal had been to keep the project completely separate from the older Alternative School student body. The younger population operated on a different classtime schedule, had a separate recreation area, and had a minimum of shared activities with the older students. It was thought that the younger students should not be exposed to the negative social influences of older at-risk students. However, it soon became

obvious that this population had already been well-exposed to the negative influences of the adolescent peer group and that, in fact, the interaction with older, bigger students tended to have a calming effect, particularly upon aggressive behaviors. Although it was recognized that this population continued to have special needs in terms of both academics and social expectations, the programs were intermingled considerably after the first year. Recreation areas were shared; class schedule times coincided; and the younger students were included in all school wide programs and activities. This decision, as well as the existence of a long waiting list for the program, also led to the decision to mainly accept young people who had already developmentally entered adolescence.

Finally, it had been the original goal of the project to operate without the assistance of social workers. A hallmark of the Alternative School concept has been the infusion of the social work discipline into an educational setting. However, in an effort to make Operation Rescue more financially feasible, it was felt that the teaching staff (a certified teacher and a classroom aide) could take the roles of both social worker and teacher for this project. By the end of the first semester, it became obvious that two people could not accomplish these tasks for this highly difficult population. The Jonesboro School District funded an additional one-half time social worker

position to the school so that the traditional social work component ("circles" for problem solving and communication; group, family, and individual counseling; crisis intervention; and behavior management) could be extended completely to these students.

Personnel:

It was found that working with this population takes some particular skills. It was obvious from the beginning that staff must be capable of structuring the classroom and of being in good control of both their own feelings and of the students' behaviors so as not to escalate with individual students or with the group. In addition, at-risk students need emotional support and warm, positive interactions with adults. A climate of mutual caring and personal honesty acts as a strong motivator for both learning and behavior control.

During the 1990-91 school year, the perfect combination was found. These are two energetic, experienced staff members with different but complimentary personality characteristics. They have good interpersonal communication, an abundance of good will and a solid understanding of one another's emotional needs. They share a dedication to work with difficult students in the Alternative School setting. One is a very warm, maternal individual who offers students a great deal of unconditional

love, is quite easy-going and humorous. The other, while equally dedicated, is more demanding in terms of student

behavior and classroom structure but is also highly flexible and able to remain calm during the inevitable periods of disruption.

These characteristics appear to be a key to successful work with these troubled young people.

Program:

The program which has developed is, in general, a duplication of a functional family. The above-mentioned staff characteristics, combined with some specific learning activities and a general classroom atmosphere, have created a program which can successfully address the educational and developmental needs of many children from highly dysfunctional families.

The most striking adjustment has been the need to "parent" these youngsters. This parenting model was introduced to the staff by a social work consultant to the program. Briefly, "motherlove" is unconditional acceptance and nurturing of the individual.

Some amount of this type of love is necessary for the physical and emotional growth of any child. The amount of "motherlove" that any child receives is directly related to his/her level of self-esteem. "Fatherlove" is a more conditional type of love which sets expectations for the child and sets consequences for problem behaviors. Successful achievement in the face of fatherlove creates a work ethic, a value system, and

self-respect. Any good parent carries some of each type of love to varying degrees. It is not necessarily gender related, but in this culture and in the traditional family, fathers are generally the more demanding, limit-setting parent and mothers are the more nurturing givers of unconditional love.

In a functional family, the growing child receives regular balanced doses of both types of love. In addition, the child also sees that these two perspectives occasionally clash. When the youngster can watch two adults work through differences of opinion and come to a decision about the child, then learning occurs and benefits are accrued. In addition to fulfilling growth needs, the motherlove/fatherlove dichotomy is a dynamic teaching tool through which the child can watch people who care about him make decisions about his behavior and its consequences.

The two classroom staff members act out these motherlove/fatherlove roles in this setting. Each child has some classes with each. At different times, a specific student might relate better to and function better with one than the other. These preferences tend to be short lived and are accepted by the staff as the acting out of some developmental need. That youngster then receives somewhat more teacher attention from the staff member to whom he/she is relating positively, but the other staff member is never excluded from the student's day. When behavior or communication problems

with a student arise, the two staff members will often discuss, in the student's presence, their feelings about the behavior, and arrive at a mutually acceptable solution for work with the student. In short, the staff members openly act out parenting roles in relation to each individual child.

In the context of this social approach, the academic program is highly flexible and keyed to individual needs. Students are pretested to determine areas of deficiency and are then assigned individualized work (workbooks or programmed learning materials) in the different subject areas. The majority have been seventh and eighth graders who performed academically at fourth and fifth grade levels. Although class periods are fifty-five minutes long, students will often do a variety of shorter tasks during this period. The staff does some direct teaching of learning strategies such as skimming written texts for answers, test taking skills, reading aloud in order to stimulate both auditory and visual learning channels, and practice with the use of reference materials. Reading for pleasure is encouraged with newspapers, National Geographic and other magazines being incorporated into the classwork. Recordings of rain and ocean sounds are used to enhance relaxation during reading, writing and art periods. Both taped and computerized materials are frequently used to enhance attention spans. Practice exercises are presented in a game format (crossword puzzles, flash cards,

etc...) as often as possible. Students are allowed to complete written work in the manner most comfortable to them. Either printing or cursive writing is acceptable, and although work in pencil is encouraged, both ink and typed work are allowed for students who can perform better in these modes. Students are allowed to help select academic materials in which they wish to work when they experience problems with teacher selected materials. In short, while not a democracy, the academic climate of the classroom is a highly positive one in which student and teacher work together to enhance the learning experience.

Results:

Many elements of a functional family have developed in the classroom setting, both as a result of conscious staff decisions and spontaneously in the life of the group. Some of these elements are summarized as follows:

Positive sibling and extended family relationships have developed. Many of the students have "therapeutic tutors," students from Arkansas State University who work with one or two of the classroom population on a weekly basis. Through shared activities, these individuals seem to act as a network of extended family who offer support to staff and students. Also, class members with higher level academic skills in specific subject areas often spend part of a class period tutoring their lower achieving peers. Staff has made efforts to equalize this

process but, for the most part, inferiority issues have not developed among the young people. The help is given and received with a surprising degree of good will. Students also help one another with emotional/behavioral issues, offering advice or serving as a confidant when another is upset or angry. The development of an altruistic social attitude is a by-product of a functional family and this element has also become obvious in other dimensions of the classroom. Students show pride in the appearance of their environment, often volunteering to clean up areas of the room, making classroom decorations, displaying art work and sharing other creative efforts. They enjoy working on projects in small groups, and they do not seem to make comparisons between their contributions and those of others. Although there are certainly some friendship cliques which are obvious during "free time", within the classroom walls there is a sense of understanding for each individual and a strong intergroup loyalty.

A second area is in the development of self-expression. Students are encouraged to do creative writing as part of their language skills classwork, and these offerings are always graded with positive comments and encouragement. Students have moved from the begrudging writing of a few lines to enthusiasm for these writing periods and pride in the results. Art work time

is used as a reward for academic effort. Non-destructive verbal self-expression is encouraged through classroom meetings which are held to problem solve and plan activities. The teaching staff are clearly the leaders of these groups, but individuals are encouraged to express their thoughts.

The development of a sense of play is encouraged through many activities. The group has nature walks and scavenger hunts. There is always a large jigsaw puzzle set up in a corner of one room. They will occasionally rent a movie and make popcorn, fudge, or cookies. Computer games are used as an incentive or reward for academic work. Similarly, the group has developed some family type celebrations. On several occasions, feasts have been prepared with an ethnic theme. These are complex events involving lots of hard work from each member with decorations, table settings, food, and invited guests. There is an encouragement of growth toward independence and autonomy both academically and socially. Teachers directly teach study skills, so that students can function independently in their work habits. The development of self-control is facilitated as students learn ways to express their feelings nondestructively and see appropriate problem solving being modeled. The vocational component, which involves career speakers, employability skills and field trips to local industries, encourages the setting of long range career goals.

Acquiring basic life skills is a fundamental emphasis of the program.

Conclusion:

All of these elements---a sense of play, a helpful social attitude, the sense of being a contributing member of a group, encouragement of growth toward independence and autonomy, development of self-expression and self-control, unconditional acceptance, and reasonable structure---are things that a functional family gives to a growing child. Most of these tasks and activities begin, in the normal family, prior to adolescence. Many of the classroom activities discussed above are more appropriate to a middle elementary school classroom. Yet, many of these have developed spontaneously from the many choices offered to this group. It seems highly significant that, although many of the activities may seem childish for adolescents, they have been wholeheartedly embraced by this population of students. There have been no complaints. In fact, there has been great enthusiasm for such activities. Two additional facets of classroom management are noteworthy. First, any non-destructive behavior pattern on the part of an individual student has been accepted. These have included study time in the hall, remaining in the classroom during freetime, and seeking an excess of positive attention from one or both staff members. There have been no incidents of such behavior

patterns continuing for long periods of time, or of a child totally withdrawing or becoming overly dependent. It has been assumed that these brief patterns of behavior are the expression of some developmental need of the child at a particular time. Secondly, although structure and order are the norm, there have been times that things have become quite chaotic---when papers go ungraded or the rooms are not particularly clean or there is more play than work or someone's needs are neglected. This is also typical of a functional family and usually occurs during times of activity or change. Both staff members have the capacity to "keep on breathing" through the chaos and then pull the group back into more orderly functioning. Statistics confirm the success of the program during the 1990-91 school year. Only two students (7%) dropped out, as compared to a 30% drop-out rate during the two previous years. 33% (eleven students) either have or will move back into regular school settings, and many more have made a successful transition to the Alternative School classes for older students. Eight of ten eighth graders passed the Arkansas Minimum Performance Test. Most showed a two year achievement gain in one or more basic skills subjects. It has been an exciting experience to watch the evolution of this project. The successes this year have given our staff hope that these at-risk young people can indeed be "rescued."